

Commencement Address at
Ohio State University
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Handwritten notes and signatures in the top right corner, including "Don't" and "V. J. J."

TOWARD THE MODEST SOCIETY

-- greatness on this Spaceship Earth --

Members of the graduating class, we participate today in a very old and very special ritual; the commencement exercise. Your long black gowns, still fashionable after over 800 years, have their origins in the medieval universities -- which were cold and drafty. There are two things quite remarkable about commencement. We have never lost a candidate, nor have we had a memorable commencement address -- one that was remembered twenty years, or for that matter twenty days later. My hunch is that a commencement speaker could scissors and paste paragraphs from Norman Vincent Peale, the Saturday Evening Post, and Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, read the homogenized prose with confident conviction -- and no one would know the difference. This is because "Commencement" is really a time for reverie, for -- if you will -- daydreaming. The graduate and his family are absorbed in the magic of proven accomplishment: you are actually graduating! Your commencement speaker can speak up boldly, since he shall be widely unheard.

Supersonic jets and traffic jams, open heart surgery and infant mortality rates, rising prosperity and air pollution -- this is what I want to talk about.

But of course all this is by way of advancing my argument.

Very simply, it is that we have had too much talk in our country of greatness -- whether of great cities, great universities, or most recently, the "Great Society." So what's wrong with "greatness." Wasn't the country founded by "great" men? Is not the United States a "great" power on the world stage? After all, America was not built by modest men with modest ambitions. This is the land where the eagle screams, and Americans find it quaint that a United States Senator should describe our foreign policy as the "arrogance of power."

We have always been a Paul Bunyan country, exuberant, bombastic, given to gross exaggeration. In frontier days this was good clean fun, and no one took "boosterism" very seriously. But on the Spaceship Earth, where even in these United States the population presses hard against natural resources, our national obsession with greatness is at best irrelevant, at worst positively dangerous. Modern America -- so it seems to this observer -- is more concerned with form than substance, more enchanted with promises than with performance. My quarrel, and it is a lover's quarrel, is with a habit of mind that equates bigness with progress, that confuses growth with achievement, and that mistakes busyness with fulfillment.

We put the label of "greatness" on the wrong measures, on the technological spectacles such as supersonic jets, open heart surgery, and the production triumphs of the American economy. One could easily include the universities in the indictment, for here too we have worshiped

false gods: the greatness that is measured by the number of books in the library, the printed pages of scholarly production, the dollars in the endowment, the head count of Nobel prize winners and distinguished scholars.

But the conventional "greatness" is wholly inappropriate in the new America. It is no accident that the University of California at Berkeley, a great university by every conventional index, has been the scene recently of the greatest agony and the greatest failures. It is no accident that in transportation, in medicine, and in public health -- to take these three areas as examples -- the most astonishing technological triumphs are paralleled by the most extraordinary social failures.

Start with the transportation crisis. The transportation system of the nation can only be described as an unholy mess -- and a worsening mess at that. It is not the American home but the American car that is our castle, a castle on wheels. Within the decade we shall have 110 million drivers jammed bumper to bumper on ever more crowded freeways. In India, the cow is a sacred animal; in America, the car is a sacred machine. Both are profoundly disruptive, and both are untouchable -- although for different reasons. No conceivable expressway program, however massive, can handle the great traffic jams that are throttling our traffic arteries and polluting our air. So what are we doing about the Great Traffic Jam? Very little. Why? Perhaps because our most recent infatuation is the supersonic jet which will get you from New York to New Delhi or Tokyo or Paris before you really want to get there! Or as one

cynic said, the supersonic jet cuts the flying time from Harlem to Watts in half. The price tag for development of the supersonic jet is four billion dollars of your tax money. And we have not begun to face up to the ear-splitting supersonic boom or to the building of huge and costly new landing fields, and connecting ground systems of transportation. This monstrous new toy will create a fallout of unintended and undesirable consequence which no one is prepared to face. We have turned away from the painfully difficult and intricate problem of designing a mass transportation system and embraced a new adventure in technology: Operation Supersonic.

I take health as the second illustration. Again, our taste is for spectaculars in technology. We are fascinated with the complex gadgetry that makes possible open heart surgery. It is far easier to devote large sums to the search for such new technologies than it is to develop comprehensive workable programs for the delivery of health services to all kinds of people in all walks of life. Yet each year 100,000 babies die before age one. What becomes of our boast that American medicine is the best in the world when in fact thirteen countries have lower infant mortality rates than does the United States. A recent study suggests that in the lifespan of today's teenagers the chances of death by suicide exceed the chances of death by cancer. In our preoccupation with the dramatic disease, as for example heart disease, we neglect the fast-growing health hazards of our urban environment. In our state and local public health programs we lag behind many European nations.

Our investment in health is badly out of balance. We have subsidized medical research but have neglected the training of doctors and nurses. Would you believe that one out of every six physicians practicing in America is a foreign-born or foreign-trained doctor. A magnificent medical research program has given us the new knowledge to provide superior care and treatment to all our citizens. But we have not yet learned how to bring the new knowledge to the bedside of the sick, especially if the sick also happen to be poor. Right now the Congress is cutting back on the health component of the War on Poverty program. Dr. William H. Haber, economist at the University of Michigan, recently pointed out that, "This nation has 19 million children living in homes which have no hot water and no inside toilets." While the Congress debates the War on Poverty, the poor are denied information on family planning.

My third illustration is air pollution. A decade or so ago, smog was a monopoly of Los Angeles, a local problem and a national joke. Today, no major American city has clean, safe air. We are rapidly using up the most precious of our natural resources: fresh air. There is no defense against the chemical compounds that you inhale in New York or Cleveland or Chicago or Columbus. As of today the battle against air pollution in cities is being lost. We had better grasp this central fact, and we had better act quickly. Thanks to the marvelously productive American economy and especially the automobile, none of us can escape for long the new health hazard of air pollution. Here, as in transportation and medicine, we had better reconsider the national priorities. A thriving economy can be measured by its output of goods and services as, for

example, the gross national product, which is our conventional index of national prosperity. But it ought to matter whether we are producing more dogfood and deodorants, or more hospitals and schools. And isn't it time we counted the social costs and took whatever steps are required to turn the tide. It should not have to be argued that the right to clean air is an inalienable natural right.

On every front an exploding technology is generating problems seemingly beyond control. We have giant power, but like Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians, we seem chained by a thousand frustrating threads. The agricultural revolution drives farmers and farm laborers in great numbers off the land. These refugees from rural America now crowd the ugly ghettos of our great cities. Automation promises new leisure in the long run. But men live out their lives in the short run, and in the short run automation may well produce an army of unemployables. We have the technical ability to do almost anything we choose: explore space, rebuild the cities, clean up pollution in the air and in the rivers and lakes. Yet most of us suffer from a deepening uneasiness. Our childlike faith in science and technology goes hand in hand with growing cynicism about our capacity to create the good life, let alone the great society. Washington's "credibility gap" has its roots in Main Street, U.S.A. It is the affliction of a society that prefers big boasts in newspaper headlines and spectacular triumphs in technology to painstaking, undramatic efforts at solving the less visible but more fundamental problems.

Our power to achieve greatness far surpasses our performance. In a sense, American technology represents the triumph of technique over purpose. Having lost track of our goals, we redouble our energies. The world-renowned architect, C. A. Doxiadis, spoke of the American condition when he wrote,

"What is our goal? At this point we have to admit that we have no goals. We are developing a technology that is changing our life, yet we have set no goal for it. No businessman would buy machinery at random when building a factory, no housewife would collect furniture at random for her home. Yet this is exactly what we are doing in the case of our cities, the physical expressions of our life. For them we are producing and collecting at random."

About a decade ago President Eisenhower set up a Commission on National Goals. It was a flop -- possibly even a great flop -- because in fact national commissions do not establish the goals of a free people; goals can be achieved through the mediation of the political process.

In an urban society we must be our brother's keeper if we are to be the keeper of the security and welfare of our own family. It is that simple. This is why many young Americans are "turned on" with a new idealism. The mood is not Utopian; there are no fantasies of a perfect world. Instead we see the first glimmerings of participation in public affairs, and with it a new style of political action -- pragmatic, tough-minded, realistic.

It is a mood and style of behavior that all Americans must cultivate. The old ideologies, with the tired labels of "conservative" and "liberal," have little relevance to modern America, which must be a

"problem-solving" as well as a "problem-creating society." The physical frontier has vanished; resources of land and water and even fresh air are no longer limitless. It is no longer Paul Bunyan country. We are called upon to shift from what economist Kenneth Boulding calls the "cowboy economy" of careless exploitation to the "space-man economy", where all resources must be carefully husbanded. In his words,

"Greatness is a totally inappropriate moral attitude for spaceship society, which has to be above all things modest. Greatness is all right on great plains; it is wholly inappropriate to a tiny fragile sphere. A spaceship cannot afford cowboys; it probably cannot afford horses, and it certainly cannot afford men on horseback. It looks like a tea ceremony, not a parade ground. The slightest touch of grandiosity could ruin it. It involves conservation, coexistence, extreme care in conflict, resolution, and, above all, no rocking of the boat."

In our new spaceship society, the controls are extraordinarily delicate and there is diminished room for maneuver. It is easy to feel imprisoned, captive of the decisions made by "They" -- by Big Business, Big Labor, Big Government. It is not simply the young radical who feels alienated; many of us feel trapped in the face of giant forces seemingly beyond our control. A sense of helplessness is now endemic in some groups; it could rise to epidemic proportions.

But it need not. The same ingenuity, audacity and talent that created science and technology can be applied to the problems generated by an exploding technology. The diseases of our civilization -- the pollution of air and water, the congestion of traffic, the sickness of the cities -- can be brought under control. A spaceship economy requires that we create a

spaceship political system to match. This wildly improbable age requires wildly improbable solutions. There is no cause for defeatism; we are farther along in our efforts than many of you may imagine.

We hear much of the "downward spirals" of poverty and despair -- as symbolized, for example, by the existence of third generation welfare clients. But there are upward cycles of hope and achievement as well.

New systems of mass transportation now on the drawing boards promise revolutionary breakthroughs in the quick, efficient movement of people and goods.

New tools of management, operations research, systems analysis, and the like, enable us to bring the giant bureaucracies, both public and private, under control. These tools make bureaucracy manageable.

New patterns of cooperation between all levels of government promise a creative federalism. The institutional as well as the technological tools are now at hand to clean the rivers and restore safety to the air that we breathe.

New and imaginative thinking in architecture and city planning promise a new urbanism. The urban jungle is not inevitable. In Montreal, a pioneering architect has designed a new kind of apartment house for Expo 67, the international exhibition. Habitat 67 is designed around a single and striking principle: that each dwelling unit must have some sun. This young architect reflects the new style of problem-solving when he says,

"I believe man can be in control, and take his cities into his own hands, and make them in his own image."

New revolutions in education and health are already well under way. More has been done in the past decade to expand educational opportunity and to extend health services to the many than in the past century.

What kind of America are we building? There is a very special kind of battle taking place. The political wars in Congress and in City Hall are only blurred and confused reflections of the battle of conscience and will within each of us. There is a fork in the road for the university graduate -- indeed for all of us. One road exalts a narrow and self-defeating individuality. Its unspoken slogan is: "I'll get mine, Jack." The end of this road is a corrosive cynicism and the self-pitying cry, "Why don't 'they' do something about it" -- whether the "It" is a new traffic light, clean air, or a new foreign policy. The other road invites you to full membership in the exciting adventure of a self-governing people. It asks not what you can get, but what you can give. And the end of the road is not self-sacrifice but self-fulfillment.

The excitement and fun on Spaceship Earth are found in politics and in public service. The pervasive American skepticism of "government" is obsolete. Only governments can serve as the tool of the common purpose, in cleaning up the air, the water, the transportation mess, the cities and the countryside. We cannot leave it to the experts, many of whom have power without purpose. Only the people can decide the ends and purposes

which the experts are to serve. So I say to you: share actively in the "life and passion of the times." Don't play it cool; get involved. Your opportunities for participation are limitless. There is unfinished business everywhere, in reforming the schools, revitalizing the cities, and redefining priorities in all areas of public policy. And don't be embarrassed about having strong views about public policy -- if, that is, you are prepared to share in the dialogue. Public service is where the action is. And more warriors are needed. The frustrations are many. You won't always get your way; in fact, you won't get your way very often. But in politics there are, in Montaigne's words, "some defeats more triumphant than victories." The most fulfilled Americans today are the happy warriors who battle for some public goal that has become their concern.

The Spaceship Earth, like the Spaceship Apollo, has enormous power at its fingertips. The hands at the controls must be extraordinarily sensitive; we teeter precariously between great achievement and great disaster. Carelessness at the controls is intolerable, for the margins of safety are thin. Within the lifetime of you graduates the population of the United States is expected to more than double. What will an America of 400 million people be like?

I give you two contrasting versions. The one is more of the same -- more goods, glitter, gadgetry, more alienation and cynicism, more asphalt jungles of dreary ugliness that shrink the human spirit -- in short a busy but empty America worshipful of its technologies and still

indifferent to the social consequences of that technology. Surely this is a nightmare vision of the future.

The other vision is of an America that, introspective about its goals, is master of its technology; generous in its treatment of the poor, the weak, the disadvantaged; determined to restore the purity of air and water and the natural beauty of the landscape; eager in its ambition that every citizen fulfill himself. This is no vision of Utopia -- we shall no sooner solve one problem than we shall be faced with others. Nor is it a vision of a Great Society if by greatness we mean the worship of spectacular technological achievements. I call modest the society that makes technology the servant of its finest purposes.

The modest society will treasure this Spaceship Earth, its mountains and meadows, its wildlife and its people-life.

It will have a reverence for life, for nature in all its infinite variety and limitless beauty.

It will see the giant California redwoods, which were young saplings in the early dawn of civilization, not as raw timber for suburban houses but as a priceless heritage to be dedicated to our children's children.

It will demand clean rivers, and clean air, and clean streets.

It will hold that privacy and the opportunity to escape to the solitude of wilderness is not simply another consumer choice but rather an indispensable condition for survival in a crowded, urban environment.

The rediscovery and repair of the American landscape will be the second priority of the modest society. Its first priority will be the rescue of the cities. Without this all will be noise and clutter, crowding and confusion, and weariness of soul.

The modest society will treasure individual privacy and individual freedom, not for the privileged few but for all. Its goal will be the full development of the talents of Everyman, not for the sake of national greatness, but because the unfolding of human capability is intrinsically good.

The modest society will join work and leisure in a seamless web of accomplishment and satisfaction. It will honor artisans and artists, plumbers and poets, holding no useful calling in disrepute.

Eric Hoffer, a longshoreman who is also a philosopher, has said that, "People in a hurry cannot think, cannot grow, nor can they decay. They are preserved in a state of perpetual puerility." The modest society will not confuse a few spectaculars with solid accomplishment. It will be less concerned with its image and more attentive to its performance. Above all it will not be content with glittering technological achievements that generate a frightful fallout of unintended consequences. John Mason Brown has said,

"Existence is a strange bargain. Life owes us little; we owe it everything. The only true happiness comes from squandering ourselves for a purpose."

Our purpose must be the fashioning of a new America, great in its aspirations, modest in its claims of success.